

Nature's wanderings

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Biological Anomalies: Humans I. A Catalog of Biological Anomalies. Compiled by William R. Corliss. *The Sourcebook Project*, PO Box 107, Glen Arm, MD 21057, USA: 1992. Pp. 304. \$19.95.

At the very least, the author of this book will provoke genuine admiration for his disarming optimism. His professed aim is no less than to catalogue the anomalous in the Universe: "all phenomena that cannot be readily explained by prevailing scientific theories". Given the immensity of the road lying ahead, philosophical rigour might have been deemed, one suspects, an encumbrance. Indeed, the definition of anomalous is disposed of in this one-liner, and the determining criteria of what is or is not explainable by current scientific principles are reduced to a pithy sample of unfazed prose: "what in *my* opinion is not well explained. The underlining of 'my' is important, because anomalousness is often in the eye of the beholder." Which it is.

But there are many who are already persuaded that what science 'explains' is a mere patch of light in a boundless expanse of darkness. To this segment of the readership it will come as no surprise to learn that Corliss estimates that his catalogue will require a minimum of 30 thick volumes — he has already published 28 volumes, or 10,000 pages of surveys on "scientific anomalies" — and

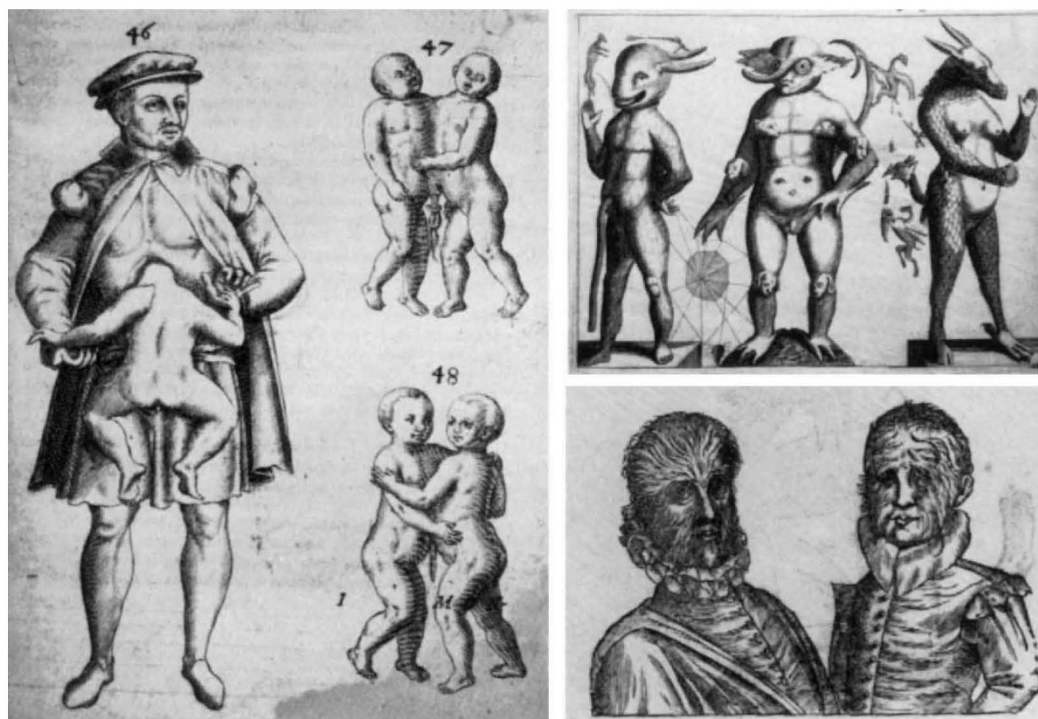
that this represents only about 40 per cent of a database constantly accruing new entries at the rate of 1,200 per year.

Corliss points out that most of his references come straight out of respected scientific journals, such as *Nature*, *Science* and *Human Biology*. A concern to distinguish the viable from the obsolete, however, is nowhere in sight. Moreover, he states that "reports from scientific journals are preferred, but all is grist for the anomaly mill!" None of this, of course, detracts from his laudable intent or astonishing energy. For Corliss, it seems, belongs in the venerable tradition of compilers of 'marvels', with an eye for the prodigious and a unique partiality for the anomalous. Think of Aldrovandi, in sixteenth-century Bologna, bequeathing to posterity a *Monstrorum Historia* in which faithful observations stand side by side with wildly imaginative renderings of mythical beings. Or Liceti's *De Monstris*, where one finds the first report of congenital deformities due to adherences between fetus and amnion, together with fanciful descriptions of beings that existed only in the minds of their creators. Similarly, Corliss juxtaposes well verified clinical observations and titbits from

the popular press.

Like his predecessors, he thinks nothing of confronting single-handedly the anomalous in astronomy, biology, geophysics, mathematics and so on. The latest volume limits its scope to human anomalies, but the author assures us that he is not interested in teratology. In his catalogue, "monstrosities are regarded as biological errors rather than biological anomalies, because no biological laws are challenged." Inevitably, we are reminded of compilers of yore. Georg Pictorius von Villigen (c.1500–1569), physician at the archducal court of Ensisheim in Alsace, wondered why eunuchs have weak sight; why the glance of a menstruating woman spots a clean mirror; why the child born in the eighth month rarely lives; or why there was greater longevity before the Flood. Corliss, the modern compiler, ponders over other puzzles: why the human body is relatively hairless when other mammals have furs; why certain health problems afflict left-handers more often than right-handers; why some humans are born tailed; or whether planetary positions and birth rate correlate with the achievement of superior abilities in some areas of human endeavour.

My prejudice is to expect 'books of wonders' to have a handsome format, adorned by the quaint engravings that decorate ancient bestiaries or the flights of fancy of Albertus Magnus. In this respect, this book is a disappointment. The presentation is homespun, camera-ready, perhaps deliberately wishing to convey the sense of urgency of 'brief communications' that, scientists insist,



SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY books on human 'monsters' tended to be written by physicians, whose interest was mainly teratological. Aldrovandi compiled an exhaustive encyclopaedia of monsters (*Monstrorum Historia*), but its publication (1642) was preceded by the compendia of Schenck (1609) and Liceti (1616). Depicted here: a case of 'parasitic ectopy' (46) and Siamese twins (47, 48) described by Schenck (far left plate); human-animal beasts of Liceti (upper plate); and a woodcut, from Aldrovandi's *Historia*, of two of the Gonzalez family, once well known in Europe for displaying hirsutism (lower plate). These illustrations are taken from more than 250 reproduced in *The Age of the Marvelous* (ed. J. Kenseth), an exhibition catalogue with nine essays exploring European interest in the unexpected, exotic, extraordinary and rare. University of Chicago Press, \$40, £31.95 (hbk), \$29.95, £23.95 (pbk).